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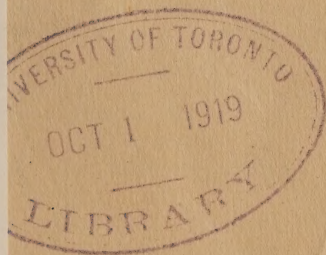
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from Helen MacMurchy]



ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TORONTO:

ublished by A. T. Wilgress, Printer to the
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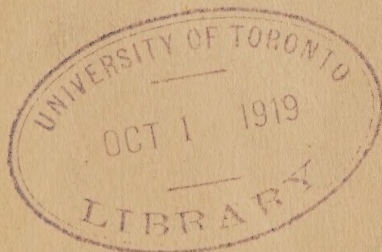
INSPECTORS PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

WHO HAVE WRITTEN TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
FOR ADVICE AS TO BACKWARD
PUPILS UNDER THEIR CARE
IN THE REGULAR CLASSES OF
THE PUBLIC AND SEPARATE
SCHOOLS OF ONTARIO

[Letter from Helen MacMurphy]



ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TORONTO:

Printed and Published by A. T. Wilgress, Printer to the
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PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS, TORONTO

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LETTER TO INSPECTORS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS

DEAR SIR OR MADAM,—



OUR personal interest in the individual welfare of your pupils, as shown by your letter of enquiry on the above subject is much appreciated by the Minister of Education. The Minister has directed that a general reply should be prepared for your use in such cases, and I am instructed to ask that you will kindly communicate with me further if there is any point which you wish to discuss more at length. I shall always be glad to hear from you.

A few suggestions may be made by way of guidance and assistance to the teachers of the regular classes who may have one or more very backward children in their classes, and further information may be found in the publications of the Department, such as the Annual Reports on Auxiliary Classes and the Auxiliary Classes Handbook (Educational Pamphlet No. 7), a new edition of which is now being prepared.

Your very backward (mentally-defective?) pupil has the same right to education that your other pupils have. It may be that he can learn with difficulty what the other children learn easily. It may be that he cannot learn some things that the other children can and do learn.

Two points must be borne in mind:

First—That he can learn something, and we must find out what that something is.

Second—That every pupil has a right to his fair share of the teacher's personal attention, direction, interest and skill.

It is not fair to the other pupils to continue to give a disproportionate share to a very backward pupil. If we can, in a short time, advance that pupil so much that he can work with the rest, well and good. If a child, after a fair trial, cannot learn to write, but only make meaningless marks, do not waste your time "teaching him" writing. Do not try to make a rope of sand. If you have forty pupils, you must not give ten per cent. of your time to one pupil, except, as has already been said, as a temporary measure and for good reasons.

Before following out the subject further, two requests may be made. First—Do please keep a School Diary, or what the Doctor calls a Case Book, or what your grandfather called a Commonplace Book. Take at least one page for each child. Of course, you should keep it under lock and key, but then a teacher needs at least one lock and key. The interest of such a book soon becomes fascinating. To put down a brief estimate of your pupils—their good points, characters, endowments—the mistakes you make about them and when and how these were corrected—the prejudices you had and who or what gave you these prejudices—the first sign of real intellectual awakening—it is worth while! It is such a help and stimulus to yourself, and frees you from the deadly enemy Routine, which has ruined more teachers and pupils than we can count! In teaching a backward pupil, such a Case Book is invaluable.

The second request is—Do, please, ask yourself the question: "Why is this pupil backward?" and find the answer.

Remember that very few pupils are mentally defective. You are Counsel for the Accused. If you can possibly prove that your pupil is not mentally defective, that is the best day's work you have ever done. It is a crime to whisper that any child is mentally defective who may be only backward. Keep silence. A physician, and an experienced and able one at that, is alone competent to make the diagnosis of mental defect. A community diagnosis is a different thing. Where normal people have had one or two generations to think things over they seldom fail to make a correct diagnosis of mental defect, if it is really present. This has been done for centuries. The Scotch expression, "Wanting a penny in the pound," or the brief verdict, "Not all there," are significant of this. When the second or third generation appears in the school-room from such a family, well-known in all the countryside, the diagnosis is already made. Our duty then is to find out what the powers and capacities of our new pupil are, and to seek diligently until we find them. But when, in a new class, we find a very backward pupil, or when a new pupil, much over age, is brought to our class, the only question for us is "Why?" What is the cause and the meaning of this backwardness?

The cause of backwardness may be physical, mental, moral, social. It may be in the Body, the Mind, the Nature, the Nurture, the Parents, the Home, the School, Society, the State—"For there, too, lurks the enemy."

Beware of giving up the quest before you begin.

There must be some reason. And if you, with your professional skill and experience, cannot answer "Why?" it is probable the Doctor can help you, and always the School Nurse is a very great ally.

Do not allow the attitude of the parents to influence you too much. They may say, "Oh, the Doctor cannot do anything." On the contrary, the doctor can nearly always do something, especially the family doctor. Backwardness from bodily causes is very common. Among the commonest of such causes and some remedies are:—

Defective sight—Glasses prescribed by an oculist.

(Give front seat in class-room.)

Defective hearing—Teach lip-reading. (Give front seat in class-room.)

Defective breathing—Examination of nose and throat by doctor who will advise remedy.

Defective teeth—Teach how to keep teeth clean. Attention by dentist.

Defective immunity—Strengthen the child's "constitution."

Defective nutrition—Good food, fresh air, exercise, sleep.

These causes are extremely common. Do you realize that you are responsible for finding them out and doing all in your power to get them remedied? Any one of them may cause your pupil to lose his education or his health, or both, or may make him very backward. If there is no School Medical Officer and no School Nurse, and the parents have not found out that there is anything wrong, then you are the child's only hope for proper attention and a fair chance. Put down your observations and your efforts in your School Diary. If your child is pale, listless and easily fatigued, he may be going to bed too late at night, or up too early in the morning, thus losing sleep. Children must have plenty of sleep. They should not be wage-earners, working either before or after school, if it interferes with this. Do you know which of your pupils are wage-earners? Put it in your School Diary and do not forget it.

Look at your children from a new point of view as often as you can. You seldom talk to anyone—pupil, mother, father, brother, sister, nurse, doctor, fellow-teacher—about your pupil, without learning something you did not know before. Have you the confidence of your pupils? They know a great many things about this backward pupil that you do not know, and if they are sure you will use this information with proper regard for his views and theirs about respecting that confidence,

they will tell you some of these things that they know and you do not.

It may not be loss of sleep. Somebody should know about home conditions. Why not you? You are interested, are you not? The clergyman visits the home. The doctor visits the home. You belong to as important a profession as either. If you cannot visit all the homes, visit the homes where your backward pupils live, but do not sound a trumpet before you to tell why. Ontario is rich enough, and will soon be wise enough, to see that—if getting up at 5.00 a.m. to deliver papers, or sitting up till 11.00 p.m. to deliver groceries, or not having enough to eat, or smoking in boyhood, or living in a one-roomed house, (Some children do!), is spoiling her future citizens—she should change all that and she will. The teacher has a strategic position as a “social worker,” and should direct and co-operate in social work.

It may be some disease. You think the pupil is inattentive and lazy. Perhaps you do not know all the facts. There is such a thing as laziness. But it has happened before now that a child who seemed lazy was really sick. There is no use denying it. The doctor has a stethoscope to examine the heart and knows a leaky valve when he hears it. The doctor knows the signs of tuberculosis and rheumatism and many another enemy of childhood, whose invasion is so insidious that those who see the child every day fail to realize that anything is wrong.

Or the problem may be a very simple one. Mary is away now with the whooping-cough and you think you remember she was absent last spring, and look up her page in your School Diary—Yes, she was away five weeks with measles, and when she came into your class in January she had been away for a couple of months with scarlet fever, so your diary says! Is it any wonder that Mary is backward? Here is one of the pupils who deserve “intensive cultivation” in the school-room, if she is strong enough; or, perhaps, special consideration, shorter hours and more sunlight, better food, with an occasional special lesson.

The real reason of the child's backwardness may be very obscure. There is such a thing as school incompatibility. It may be some old, unhappy, far-off feud with some teacher you never saw, but you are the innocent victim of the child's outraged sense of justice—until he finds that you are not unjust. Have patience. It may be that that family have moved seven times in the seven years of the child's school life, and he has given up the

struggle to adjust himself to seven different schools and seven different school populations with varied methods of school government. Teachers are hard for a child to understand anyway, but who could understand and adjust himself to so many teachers in one short school lifetime! So the pupil's mental action does not flourish any more than a plant would flourish if it were as frequently uprooted. Try special attention, personal interest and "intensive cultivation" before the family flit again. If you are really interested in the child, he can hardly help being interested in himself and in his work. It may be only "cranking" that he needs—"three extra notches of gasoline," as it were. Try him "on the battery"! It is not every child who has a "self-starter." Before you know it, you are fond of the child, and then you will get on, and so will he.

This brings us in sight of the psychology of childhood. This new and fascinating subject is only beginning to be guessed at. The mind of a child is sometimes engaged in a life and death struggle with some complete misapprehension which terrorizes him. He has "got in wrong" and he cannot recover himself. His initiative has been blighted by sarcasm or slain by the arrows of outrageous fortune; it is cut down and withered. He is not going to attempt anything. He fears his fate too much. He does not know how much you can do for him, so he wraps his talent in a napkin and buries it in the earth, and that was a pity, for he had only one talent. So he gets more and more behind. From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. Again, you are his only chance. Do you know anything about this boy at all? No. Well then, somebody does, and unless you intend to let him go under and drown, you must find out from some one else what life-line he can cling to. Is he fond of pets? Make a survey of his possibilities and do, for God's sake, give him a chance!

Sometimes the home conditions are very bad. It is hard for the school to do much for the product of a bad home. So there is a law on the Statute Books of Ontario, a law which has often helped both the child and the school, providing for proper care for neglected children. You might need to invoke that law.

Some children are quite slow of comprehension and dull of mind. That is not their fault. They usually come by it honestly. They are apt to be rather backward, but we should not set too high a school standard for them. In character-training, they are often at the head of the class, and who would hesitate between achievement in

character and achievement in academic subjects? History, literature, composition and "citizenship" often show their solid worth and real thoughtfulness. Give them a helping hand with other subjects and don't keep them too long at things they can do without.

So much for the backward child—the greatest unrealized asset of the nation. The Victory Bond Committees mined a great deal of gold in Canada. It was valuable, but its value is as nothing in comparison with the riches hidden away and lost in wasted lives—citizens who from childhood to old age are simply "duds" because no one ever sets free their powers. The Great War showed us the amazing riches of heroism, resourcefulness, power, initiative, perseverance, unselfishness—in one word, character—in the poorest of us. The Great Peace will show us how to set about realizing these in establishing a new world where Education shall not be a name and Democracy a delusion.

"In re-construction, education is the only thing that really matters."

Teacher—Save that Backward Child!

* * * * *

But in some cases the child is not backward. He is mentally defective. That is, the cause of his backwardness is irremovable. Of course he may have some of the removable defects too, which we must remove if possible. (See above.) The teacher is not responsible for this mental defect, nor for diagnosing it, nor for its consequences. Neither Socrates nor Arnold of Rugby could educate the mind of a child who has little or no mind to educate. Do not try to teach the child what he cannot learn. Teach him what he can learn. What the teacher has to do is to develop the powers of the child. We must first find out what these powers are.

"Nature has put the defective child in a class by himself, and we should follow her example." But where there is no class for the defective child by himself or with other defective children, should he be excluded from the regular class? Not unless his presence there seriously interferes with the progress of the class and the work of the teacher. The rights of the majority and the normal child must not be interfered with. It is usually a mistake to attempt to keep a child in school whose mental age is below the legal (permissive) school age, or one whose chronological age is so far in advance of the average age of the class as to render his presence undesirable. It is not uncommon to find in the Primary

or First-Book Class a defective child of eleven or twelve years. This is not suitable.

Of course, in any case, the Principal, the parents, the family physician, and if possible, the School Doctor and School Nurse should be consulted privately by the teacher, and every respect and consideration should be shown both to the child and the parents. Any action of the school authorities, such as requesting that the child should not come to school, should usually be fortified by a medical opinion.

Where the defect, however, is not so pronounced, an effort should certainly be made by the school authorities to give the child some education. It is often well to give him a seat in a part of the room by himself and to give him at the same time the privilege of doing some simple duty, usually entrusted to one of the best pupils. If his desk and seat can be in some way favourably placed or distinguished or specially equipped, it will help to make his school life happier and more successful. But do not shut your eyes. Teachers often "get used to" a child's defects and forget them. Remember the age of the child in any estimate you make of his powers. Show the child great kindness and respect and see that your pupils do the same. It is "part of your job" to carry him along. Make the pupils feel that it is "part of their job" too.

Always—Always—Always—encourage the mentally defective. Never—Never—Never—under any circumstances say or do anything to discourage them. They have not the normal power of self-dependence and self-encouragement. Let them have some special possessions, and teach them to take care of these. Such lessons will be of real value.

It will repay you richly to teach your pupil good personal habits and hygiene. Everything we can teach him which enables him to keep himself and his clothes clean and neat is of great advantage. Be prepared to spend much time and attention on this.

Analyze the simplest thing you teach him into tiny steps—so small that the ordinary pupil would take half-a-dozen such steps in one mental movement. Realize that one such tiny step is a great achievement for the mental defective, and then drill and drill and change and repeat until this step becomes automatic. Aim at industrial training and industrial habits. But we must always be clear that our pupils can really profit by what we teach.

Mental defectives are much more easily "bored" than

the normal children. Mental effort fatigues them quickly. A big boy of seventeen years chronological age and mental age seven years may be more fatigued by five minutes' book learning than by five hours' hard work. Give them very short lessons.

Mental defectives differ among themselves as much as normal people do. They all have their good points. There are a great many different types, such as the "Smiler," almost unteachable; the voluble and loquacious—often so glib as to deceive even a magistrate; the restless type—never still; the silent type, who scarcely ever speaks; and the good, kind, decent ones, who are a comfort.

Mental defectives are very different at different times. They have good and bad days. They frequently have a "twenty-four hours memory." The tablets of memory on which you think you have written some lesson to-day may be found quite blank to-morrow. If that happens constantly, do not waste your time. You will never get any result but wasting your time and the ratepayers' money.

Keep these children busy to the limit of their capacity, but do not fatigue them. They are often good hand-workers, and they can be educated through the hand better than through the head. They are often clever mechanically.

Respect and develop their powers of affection, but do not let them grow sentimental. Never teach them anything that they will not use in after life. Develop anything that will help in the slightest degree to make them useful in the home, in the community, or as wage-earners, however humble the work.

Never lose sight of any chance for vocational training of any kind. Of course, it is usually of a very simple and humble kind.

Try to get the training started at as early an age as possible. Has your pupil any younger brothers or sisters? Are they defective? Can they be given some training? The hopeful years are from three to thirteen. After that the progress is not so good. But all mentally defective children who come to school have *some* intelligence, and can learn something at school.

It is probable that a special time-table ought to be made for your mentally defective child, but this will take time to develop. Perhaps we place too much emphasis on writing and reading. What use is writing going to be to your feeble-minded pupil? What will he do with it? It is likely that you will be able to teach him to write his name. That will be useful to him. Anyone who has taught a feeble-minded

child the alphabet by means of giving him letters three or four inches high, cut out of wood, to handle and play with, will remember what a help these letters were. The Phonic method is not always the best to use for such children. And do not try to give him all the lessons yourself. Your other pupils will often succeed in teaching him things that you cannot teach him. If there is a sign "For Sale" on a house near by, borrow it and use it to teach your boy these words. That lesson will lead to several others, and gradually the child may learn to read well enough to help himself and interest himself.

Of course the higher grade mental defectives or "morons," as they are called, or border-line cases, can learn to write or read easily. Readers of Dickens will remember Mr. Toots and his prowess as a letter writer. Mr. Toots got on quite well in Dr. Blimber's Academy. So will the Mr. Toots in your class—in a way. Writing from a copy—large round hand—is a favourite employment with many feeble-minded children. It does them no harm when they can do it fairly easily. They learn neatness and some control of hand and fingers. But in teaching reading and writing, do not use superhuman efforts to teach the child. It is sometimes agony to him and always exhausting to you, and no good comes out of it. Teach him what he can learn.

We may almost say, as a rule, that a child who is fairly good in arithmetic is not mentally defective. Arithmetic is the greatest school difficulty that a feeble-minded child has to meet. Do not drill him for ever on tables. He may learn them by dint of repetition, but often he cannot use them and will, therefore, forget them. Long division is usually the upper limit of a feeble-minded child's arithmetic. But concrete work he can often do. Let him weigh, measure, number, to his heart's content, and procure or make simple apparatus for his own use. Think of simple industrial work for him.

Drawing is a fine subject for children who can manage paper and crayon or slate and pencil. Give them pieces of cheap paper or wrapping paper. Let them cut out pictures and advertisements and use them. Many mentally defective children have good powers of imitation.

Music is an exceedingly important subject for mentally defective children. For some reason, which we can only guess at, they nearly all have some idea of music and most of them are very fond of it. To learn to play on some instrument is a great thing for such a child and lessons of this kind are very helpful.

Simple physical training as to step, gait, posture, reflex action, response to command, is important. Give the child every possible opportunity for this. Here again, as in nearly all the other subjects, a senior pupil can give excellent lessons, with some supervision. Every effort should be made to help mentally defective pupils to join in simple games. They may not play like the rest nor with children of their own size and age, but they can learn to play.

Occupational training, pasting, matching pictures, using a board with holes, in which pegs or other things can be fitted, sorting different things, stringing beads, arranging colours, following an outline with tracing paper, simple weaving, sewing, knitting, colouring and all forms of work with paper, may be utilized in teaching children. But do not allow them to keep the supplies. Keep the supplies for them in a special cupboard and, if convenient, provide lessons for a month or more, or for a whole school term, with little or no repetition. This can be managed easily by using in the different seasons of the year the material that nature supplies, or using materials that the industries of the neighbourhood render available or using waste products. Sewing on cards, working in wood sometimes, string work, making mats and simple baskets, and, if the pupil progresses so far, manual work and weaving may be gradually introduced. With girls, domestic and home training is of the greatest value, and, indeed, it is very important to co-operate with the occupations of the parents and the work carried on in the home in every possible way.

There are three books which may be mentioned as of special value to teachers of very backward children, or children who appear to be mentally defective. These books are "The Boston Way," by the Special Class Teachers of Boston, published by the Rumford Press, Concord, N.H., and "An Introduction to Special School Work," by Marion F. Bridie, L.L.A., published by Edward Arnold, London, England, and "Simple Beginnings in the Training of Mentally Defective Children," by Margaret MacDowall, published by the Local Government Press Co. (R. T. Leach), London, England.

I have the honour to be, Sir or Madam,

Your obedient servant,

HELEN MACMURCHY,

Inspector of Auxiliary Classes.

PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS, TORONTO,

March 19th, 1919.

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